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SUBJECT: A COALITION OF GROUPS PROTEST AGAINST HONDURAN CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL OF CAFTA

¶11. Summary - On March 8, several groups protested against the CAFTA resolution which was passed by the Honduran congress on March 3. The protesters blocked roads in various locations outside of the capital. At approximately 1645 hours, more than 800 demonstrators protested in front of the Congress. In the outlying areas, there was one incident of violence reported and a minor injury to a police officer occurred. The protest in front of the Congress resulted in property damage to vehicles and buildings located near the National Congress. While none of the protests were directed at the embassy, Post does not discount that possibility in the future. End Summary

¶12. On March 8, demonstrators from various groups protested in several locations in Honduras. They were protesting against the Honduran Congress' passage of the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) agreement. The demonstrators blocked roads in various parts outside of the capital of Tegucigalpa. Local authorities estimated that 1,500 demonstrators blocked the road in Las Mercedes, located near Soto Cano airbase near Comayagua. It was reported that 500 demonstrators blocked the main road outside of Santa Rosa De Copan, located six hours northwest of the capital. Near Copan in the Colonia 6 de Mayo, reports stated that demonstrators slashed the tires and broke the window of a police vehicle. It was in this same area that a police officer was hurt by an object thrown by one of the demonstrators. Police reported to RSO that 300 demonstrators were present in Siguatepeque, located 45 minutes north of the Soto Cano airbase. (NOTE: Though various routes were blocked outside of the capital, the streets and thoroughfares in and around the capital were clear. This is a departure from previous large protests organized by Bloque Popular, where protesters concentrate on blocking the main roads leading out of the capital. Endnote). Honduran Minister of Finance William Chong Wong was quoted in the press saying that the road blockages had cost Honduras hundreds of millions of lempiras in economic losses, and had caused losses to other countries in the region that export via Honduras. Chong said that these kinds of actions could cause El Salvador and Nicaragua exporters to export through other countries, further damaging Honduras. Finally, he noted, campesinos (those whom the protests were allegedly meant to defend) are also hurt by the road blockages, as their high value added fruit and vegetable exports were blocked and perhaps ruined by the protests.

¶13. It was reported to RSO that the groups protesting in the Las Mercedes area were prevented by the police from entering the capital to join the other demonstrators in front of the Congress. At approximately 1100 hours, the demonstrators boarded buses to travel to Tegucigalpa to protest with other groups at the Congress. En route to Tegucigalpa, their buses were stopped outside the capital at a police check point and forced to turn around.

¶14. In Tegucigalpa, at approximately 1645 hours, approximately 800 demonstrators converged on the Congress. During the protest, there was a strong police presence. There were many reports of vandalism to vehicles and buildings, to include breaking windows and spray painting graffiti, in the vicinity of Congress. This happened despite a strong police presence of over 200 officers. The number of demonstrators was estimated to be fewer than 100 by the time the congressmen arrived to hear their complaints. Among their complaints, marchers highlighted the alleged duplicity of president of the Congress Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, who had reportedly scheduled a dialogue with civil society about CAFTA for March 8, but then engineered an unscheduled vote on the agreement on March 3.

¶15. The demonstrations were organized by the Bloque Popular in wake of the congressional ratification of CAFTA on March 3. A protest by government workers in favor of higher wages that had been ongoing at the time of ratification was unrelated to CAFTA. CAFTA opponents, however, caught off guard by the swift unscheduled vote in favor of the agreement, quickly mobilized the groups for a spontaneous riot inside the congressional hall on the false pretext that the CAFTA would prevent the government from granting the sought after wage

hikes.

16. On March 4, the Bloque Popular announced a nationwide anti-CAFTA protest for March 8, predicting 500,000 people would participate. During the event, fewer than 10,000 participated nationwide, with no single event garnering more than 2000 demonstrators.

17. Various unions, such as some teachers unions, and a broad cross-section of populist groups joined the Bloque Popular's condemnation of the CAFTA ratification. One leader specifically lamented the lack of consultation by the Congress which could have produced a consensus position. Traditionally, these types of "reforms" have been most accepted when the government and Congress have been more effective and transparent when including workers in such negotiations. However, in truth, the unions have been largely knee jerk in their opposition and no amount of consultation, which the GOH did engage in, would have resulted in a national consensus in support of CAFTA ratification. The CAFTA opposition plans to contest the constitutionality of CAFTA and perhaps its method of ratification, neither of which are likely to be ruled unconstitutional.

18. The opposition also used CAFTA ratification to attack other pending legislation, such as the competition (anti-trust) law, forestry law, and civil service reform law. They also claimed it would lead to the privatization of water service, inadequate funding for teachers' and health care workers' salaries, and the devaluation of the lempira. Sadly, another major point of protest is that the opponents say Honduras is not prepared or able to compete against the U.S. under the terms of the agreement, a position which reveals a lack of understanding of the phase-in protections for Honduras' agricultural producers and other key sectors.

Palmer